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ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1 Book World WASHINGTON POST
23 JANUARY 1983

Moles and Old School Spies

By GODFREY HODGSON

IN NOVEMBER 1935, a 19-year-old American undergraduate at Cambridge University wrote his mother a remarkable letter. He was probably pleased at the time with the degree of insight it showed into his own character. He can have had no inkling of how prescient it now seems. For what he was telling his mother, without knowing it, was that he had been visited by the kindly ones. These furies were to pursue him the rest of his life.

He had spent the evening, he told his mother, with his friend James, "and Whitney's friend Guy Burgess and an art historian called Anthony Blunt." He added: "Now at half past eleven I sit here and try to describe the terrible significance of it all."

Terrible its significance certainly turned out to be for him. His mother already knew that he had become a communist at Cambridge. That would in any case not have shocked her. What he was trying to explain in this letter was that he was less of a communist than he seemed. "My actions," he wrote, "are based on my personal needs rather than my convictions." He had been afraid, after the breakup of a love affair with a girl at school, "that I'd become incapable of loving. Now I've learned that I'm able to love the communist students, even if I don't love communism itself."

GODFREY HODGSON is a British television commentator. His most recent book is a study of the U.S. presidency, *All Things to All Men*.

The young man was Michael Straight. His mother, Dorothy, was a Whitney, an heiress out of the world of Henry James' novels. After Michael's father died on active service in World War I she turned to good works, to the left, and to what would now be called radical chic. She was a prototype—it would no doubt be unfair to call her a caricature—of the wealthy woman of good causes. She was an enthusiast for labor unions and settlement houses, for socialism and feminism and pacifism. She led a march down Fifth Avenue in aid of votes for women. And she put up the money for *The New Republic*.

Then she married a young Englishman called Leonard Elmhirst, as idealistic if less wealthy than herself. They bought Dartington Hall, a Tudor manor house in an exquisite fold of the green Devon hills, and turned it into what it remains today, an experimental school and a center of world importance for music and the arts. It was a utopia for those who after World War I dreamed of a new society liberated by the arts; in the late 1920s, that was a revolutionary dream.

When it was time for Michael to leave Dartington, what more natural than for his mother to consult Felix Frankfurter? What more likely than that Frankfurter should recommend a year under his friend Harold Laski at the London School of Economics?

The school's reputation as a hotbed of radicalism has always been exaggerated. But there were radicals there in the 1930s, as there have been since. In the 1930s, as in the 1960s, they were concerned both about the school's internal democracy, or lack of it, and about international affairs: specifically, in the year 1933-34, when Michael Straight was there, about the rise of Hitler.

Straight's friends at LSE were radicals, some of them communists. What more natural than that, when he moved on to Cambridge to read economics at Trinity, he should move into a circle of radicals, some of them, too, communists.

Straight was a bright student, and he studied with some of the great names in 20th-century economics: D.H. Robertson, Joan Robinson, John Maynard Keynes himself. But it was the communists who had the most influence on him, and it was political activism, not theory, that excited his interest.

Specifically the three chief influences were Maurice Dobb, James Klugman, and John Cornford. Dobb was and is an eminent Marxist academic economist. Klugman went on to be a committed bureaucrat of the British Communist Party. And John Cornford was a romantic, gifted and attractive young poet, born into the heart of Cambridge's elite. All his family were brilliant dons, his mother a granddaughter of Charles Darwin.

Straight became active among the Cambridge communists, though he had reservations. He was reluctant, for example, to have it known outside Cambridge that he was a communist. "Students like myself," he writes now, in what sounds like honest recollection of past self-deception, "owed no allegiance to the Communist Party itself. We had enlisted as students in response to extraordinary individuals and without them were adrift."

Straight became a member of the Cambridge Conversazione Society, known as the Apostles, the secret society that chose young men for their intellectual brilliance, sometimes for their intellectual family connections, and often for their homosexual predilections. (Not Straight: his sexual preference has always been for women. Like name, like nature!)

It is too simple to say that the Apostles had become a recruiting agency for Soviet intelligence. But a number of those who became Soviet agents like Burgess and Blunt were members. And perhaps the atmosphere of the Apostles, the slightly bogus intellectualism, the clandestinity, the smart leftism, and the sense of superiority to bourgeois prejudices, subtly preconditioned ambitious young men, shocked by what they saw as the heedless conservatism of their own society, to what can now only be called treason.

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